Chapter 5

Avery's POV The key turning in my door seemed obscenely loud. When Zara stepped in, her face bore a haughty and pleased expression. My stomach sank. This wouldn't be good. "Lucky you. You get to live a little longer." She informed me, dumping a pile of clothing onto the bed. "Your marriage has been decided." So. They had found some unlucky but obliging wolf to foist me onto. I tried to stir up an emotion, but all I felt was relief that I wasn't going to die. Until she told me who it was. "You will marry Alpha Gideon." Zara crowed triumphantly. A flare of panic raced through me. My fingers trembled where they gripped the blankets. It can't be! The man is ruthless! I might as well die anyways! Zara looked at my pale face and laughed. "Oh yes, you're the only woman he would agree to marry." She stepped to the bed where I sat and pulled me to my feet. "Get up, Bride-to-be! It's your lucky day!" she sneered. I clutched at Zara's arm frantically as she hauled me up. "Zara, if he discovers that I was marked, he will kill me," I pleaded. "Actually, he won't mark you because he has a marked mate already. Who knows what happened to her! I bet you will enjoy all the drama." My stepsister laughed in my face, "And if he still finds out you were marked, just kill yourself before he tortures you to death." Zara snatched my hairbrush from my dresser and began attacking the knots in my hair. She twisted my hair up into a pile on top of my head and secured it with a clip. Then she held out a formal dress from the pile of clothing she'd brought. "Get dressed. Your fiancé is waiting, and he doesn't look like a patient man." When she was done preparing me I didn't recognize the woman staring at me in the mirror. The draped shot silk of the dress clung to my body suggestively and the flashy beading and high neck of the collar sent the whole outfit into "trying too hard" territory. I had always preferred simple styles that weren't so flashy. A dress like this was not something I would ever have chosen for myself. None of this was. You can feel sorry for yourself later. If you survive. Zara surveyed her handiwork with satisfaction. "Well, no one will mistake who you're intended for." She smirked, "Let's go." I blinked at the sunshine as we stepped out of the house. Already it felt like ages since I'd felt the sun on my face and the breeze on my skin. I would have rejoiced more in my freedom if it didn't feel like I was headed to my funeral. The path to the ceremony hall was lined with members of the pack. They milled about nervously, anticipation thick in the air. I saw Lillian, a friend of mine, staring at me worriedly. "Avery!" Lillian rushed to my side as we passed, "Are you sure you want to do this?" she whispered. I was touched by her concern. Lillian was one of the few packmates who'd never judged me for not being able to summon my wolf. She had been kind, and also brought me news about my mother when she could. I wished I could tell her everything but that would only put her in danger as well. Although it felt like I had no true choice at all, I could choose not to endanger anyone else. I hugged her tightly instead, trying to put all of my gratitude and friendship into the embrace and then kept walking. She dropped back, her eyes full of questions, but

she didn't pursue me any further. "Smart human " Zara laughed at me under her breath as we continued on, "keeping your mouth shut. Let the wolves do the talking, hmm?" A familiar man stepped into our path. Seeing his handsome figure sent a pang of ice through my heart. Maybe one day it wouldn't hurt to look at him and remember how foolishly I'd loved and believed him. Ryan squared his shoulders and stared at me with disdain as we approached. "How quickly you've changed, Avery." He said in a snide, cold voice. "It took no time at all for you to cling to another Alpha." There had been a time when Ryan had claimed to care about my well being. How quickly the man I thought I knew had changed. And now he accused me of being false? Anger boiled under my skin at the double standard. "Well you would know all about betrayal." I snapped back, "If anyone's trust was misplaced, it was clearly mine." I glanced between him and Zara, "Congratulations, you two really are perfect for each other." Ryan's jaw clenched and he looked away guiltily. I hoped he was remembering now all the times I'd shown him my loyalty. He would be lucky to get half as good from his new mate. Zara snorted, "Oh don't let her fool you with that innocent bullshit. She's no helpless victim." She ran her fingers underneath the lapels of Ryan's jacket and leaned into him to whisper, "She was so desperate to get back at you that she allowed someone else to mark her!" "WHAT?!" Ryan roared and reached for me. I tried to pivot away but he snatched at the high collar of my dress and yanked it roughly. The delicate silk and bead work was no match at all for the Alpha heir's strength. My dress tore to my collarbone, exposing my neck. "Wait-, the mark is gone-" Ryan questioned. "She healed this fast?" Zara seemed to be surprised too, grasping my neck even harder. Suddenly, the pain abated, and Zara's grip loosened. I looked up to see a large, dark form looming over us, silhouetted by the setting sun. Something familiar about him. I could not see his face at first, but his Alpha aura was menacingly palpable as he pushed Ryan and Zara away with a casual shove. The stranger turned to face me, and I was struck by his handsome appearance. I should thank him. "Thank yo-" I started to say, but the man cut me off. "So you are my chosen bride - " His eyes narrowed. "But why did I hear something about you being marked?"